

Is Army Taking Over?

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Mugabe's appointment of generals and colonels to top public sector jobs seen as political survival strategy. Senior military officers have in recent months been appointed to top posts in public institutions, including state-run companies, the central bank and the judiciary, as the armed forces increase their influence over civilian affairs.

The officers' upward march has been so swift that it has taken the public by surprise. The latest appointment was of an army general to be the country's top tax collector, overseeing the running of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, ZIMRA.

A retired army general, Solomon Mujuru, is being widely touted as the man most likely to succeed Mugabe as state president. Mujuru, under the war name Rex Nhongo, was commander of Mugabe's guerrilla forces in the war of liberation against white rule in the 1970s.

The head of Zimbabwe's powerful and much-feared Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO, is a former army brigadier. Two judges are former top military officers. One of the eight provincial governors is a former general. An army colonel is permanent secretary in the ministry of transport.

The list goes on. Military men head the strategic Grain Marketing Board and the prison service. Mugabe's inner cabinet has four soldiers serving as ministers or deputy ministers.

Less visible, but perhaps more important, is the extent of the military's influence further down the bureaucratic chain. Many managers at the Grain Marketing Board are ex-soldiers. Having thrown white farmers off their land, the military has taken over many of the farms in a move termed Operation Maguta. Military men at the Grain Marketing Board are also setting up camps on the land of black farmers and ordering them to grow maize, the country's staple food, to try to avert widespread hunger. Teams of soldiers are forcing farmers to plough up other crops such as onions, tomatoes and potatoes without telling them what price they will be paid for compulsory acquisition of maize.

Gordon Moyo, the leader of an opposition pressure group, Bulawayo Agenda, said, "The army has targeted those [farming] areas that are potentially opposition strongholds. It is partly a retributive act to take over their land and send signals to the surrounding landowners. It's an act of intimidation, and a violation of the human rights of those people."

"All basic foods are now under direct military control," said Eddie Cross, an economist and adviser to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Military officers and CIO officials, led by armed forces chief General Constantine Chiwenga, have taken hold of a number of functions of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, RBZ, bearing on monetary policy, such as the determination of a viable foreign exchange policy and managing the national money supply, marginalising RBZ governor Gideon Gono.

Economic policy has in recent months come into the hands of the Cuban-style Zimbabwe National Security Council, assigned overriding powers by Mugabe under the recently launched National Economic

Development Priority Programme which has been tasked with reversing catastrophic economic decline. The National Security Council is dominated by officers from the army, the air force, the police and the CIO. It has set up nine task forces to manage all economic sectors and oversee foreign exchange and monetary policy.

The government has defended using military and intelligence personnel to oversee the revival of the economy, described by the International Monetary Fund as the fastest shrinking in the world outside of a war zone. "There is nothing sinister with involving security force personnel in areas like the economy and food security," said Obert Mpofu, minister of industry and international trade. "The government is doing what is best for Zimbabwe. Any complaints to the contrary are only meant to rubbish a genuine economic revival and food security programme."

Dumisani Muleya, news editor of the weekly Zimbabwe Independent and one of the country's most astute political commentators, said, "There is still no decisive proof that army authority has taken root and is now the basis of governance in Zimbabwe ... [but] anecdotal evidence shows the military might be pulling the strings in civilian government issues."

"There are clear signs of the executive's erosion of confidence in public officials and the encroachment of armed forces in civilian matters. While this might serve Mugabe's self-preservation needs at the moment, it creates problems for future governments which might have to struggle to uproot an entrenched military culture in civilian government."

Military men have been appointed to senior posts in the prison service, much to the anger of long serving prison officers. "It's demoralising, as it means that promotion for committed career prison officers becomes more difficult," a junior prison officer told IWPR.

A serving brigadier heads the government's Sports and Recreation Commission, and an airforce officer, Air Commodore Mike Karakadzai, heads the National Railways of Zimbabwe, NRZ, with Army Brigadier Douglas Nyikayaramba as chairman of the NRZ board. Half of the NRZ's wagons lie derelict because there is no hard cash to import spares, including wagon wheels. A deal with the Chinese to modernise relay equipment fell through because Zimbabwe could not raise the required deposit. More than 4000 wagons are awaiting repairs.

Mugabe is believed to have a variety of goals in appointing military men to civilian posts.

Political survival is undoubtedly a major aim. On the eve of the 2002 presidential election, senior army and air force officers issued a statement saying they would not support a president who lacked credentials from the 1970s war of liberation against white rule - a clear reference to opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who in the 1970s was a young miner who had just left school. General Constantine Chiwenga reiterated this partisan stance in a speech just before parliamentary elections in March last year.

Political analyst Themba Dlodlo, of the National University of Science and Technology, said Mugabe also has his retirement prospects in mind. "For him to survive after he stops ruling he needs to have these people in power because they are his supporters and are unlikely to prosecute him for the atrocities he has committed in this country," he said.

As far as Giles Mutsekwa, a member of parliament for the MDC and shadow minister of defence, is concerned, Mugabe's motives are more complex. "He believes that drawing the military into civilian life has the effect of enmeshing it in Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis, so that as the economy continues to collapse those in the military will also be blamed," he said.

Mutsekwa said the appointment of generals and colonels, lacking administrative skills, to run the commanding heights of the civil service and the economy will not succeed. Dlodlo agreed, saying, "Theirs is administrative rule by force and it will not lead us anywhere." He said the ease with which military men had slipped into top civilian posts had a lot to do with the fact that the ruling ZANU PF party is less a political party than a paramilitary organisation, dating from its days as a Marxist-Leninist rebel liberation movement. "You can see from the way they behave, how they act and speak, that they are still operating as though they are guerrillas," he said.

Most of Zimbabwe's top military brass are veterans of the 1970s liberation war against white minority rule and are fiercely loyal to ZANU PF. With new recruits to the military now coming from Mugabe's hated youth militia, there is little hope that the military will become an impartial body in the near future. The militia training camps, which have been in existence since 2001, are places where school leavers are imbued with "patriotic values" as defined by the ruling party. Graduates from these camps, known as Green Bombers from their distinctive olive green uniforms, have been used to terrorise government opponents at successive elections.

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